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Ancilla Domini

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TWO RETREAT ADDRESSES

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QUEEN AND HANDMAID

"Upon thy right hand did stand the queen."
—*Psalm 45:9*

FOR more reasons than one we ought to spend our efforts, our thoughts, our prayers and our time on the consideration of the virtues and the greatness of Our Lady. In these times when life seems to so many of us such a hard and uncertain existence we recall to ourselves that we have her, Our Lord's Mother, to guide us through the difficult days. For she is one of us absolutely and in every way except as regards sin. She is our model in helping us to carry out our vocation, and if we have already gone on in the vocation to which we think God has called us, then we have in her the example of what a Christian should be and should do in all the circumstances of life.

As we meditate upon the life of Blessed Mary, we realize that from the beginning to the end there is not a moment of sentimentality in it. There were no audiences that applauded her, no long lines of devotees that waited outside of her little kitchen in Nazareth to discover how she did this or that. There were no loving friends there to call her "Mother of God" and to clothe her in blue garments. There was none of that admiration and devotion shown her that other women, if they had been in her position,

might have desired. Nor was there any of that "queerness" which is so often associated with good, pious women. Outwardly she was just like any other of the women of her little village — she was the Mother of Jesus and the wife of Joseph.

What an amazing amount of character there was in her, spiritually, morally and intellectually! All this helped her and enabled her to keep her balance in the midst of the tremendous responsibility of being God's handmaid and of being the Mother of God Incarnate. She was like the perfectly tuned harp struck by the hand of the expert harpist. The hands play across the strings lingering with long, vibrant notes, making their way up and up until the last and highest notes are struck. There the hand leaves it for a while with all the chords struck and vibrating and giving forth the tones and overtones in the perfect rendition of that symphony that God has played and still plays. Each string and note is simple but the harmony and the co-ordination are exquisite. Such is the life of Our Blessed Lady.

We hear of expressions such as "The Glories of Mary"—and indeed we honor her because of her glories and because of the glorious life that she now lives with Our Lord and the Saints in Heaven. We use such words as these from the 9th verse of the 45th Psalm, "Upon thy right hand did stand the queen", to express in a small way what glory, like a diamond with its many

facets, giving light and brilliance, is now hers. But to each of these glories there is a counterpart (for God would take care of that) : there is a side that speaks of humility, sacrifice, faith, hope, love, endurance, suffering, crucifixion. And it is in these less brilliant, less popular sides that we see the real glories, the real life of Our Lady on earth. Because her life here was a human life, the life that we ourselves live, it is the example given us to follow. Because her life on earth was a simple life, a life of small things done in an extraordinary way, we can use her method and follow her life. We can begin right off without any long period of practice.

There is that humility that was hers. Many young women would have liked to have been chosen as the Mother of the Messiah. But the apparent difficulty lay in the fact that they were willing to do God's will and bidding — but in their way. We are willing to do God's will but, as we say, the details ought to be up to us, — left to our judgment. We say that we are humble enough to accept God's will and plan for us, and then why could He not let us have the choice of carrying it out in our own perfectly simple way? That has a very nice, humble sound, but the principle is very unsound. There was no such false humility in Our Lady. When the Angel came in unto Mary, there she was. She was ready and waiting for God's message to her. Then she had to decide quickly and irrevocably. Picture all of heaven waiting upon her for the answer. Yet the only

question that she asks is "How?" Not "wait", not "this is too hard", not "this is beyond my strength".

In all likelihood, many of the women who would have liked to be the Mother of the Messiah were king's daughters. And they were, as the Psalm says, "the honorable women". They would have liked to be the Mother of the King, and to be the queen. According to the ideas of the world they were fitted for the part. But Blessed Mary has shown us where the true glory of being the Mother of the King consists. When she accepts, she exclaims, "Ecce ancilla Domini" — "Behold the handmaid of the Lord" (Luke 1:38). Like her Son, Our Lord, she chose "not to be ministered unto, but to minister". (Mark 10:45).

The vocation of Our Lady was to grow with Our Lord. That is the vocation of all Christians — "He must increase but *I* must decrease". (John 3:30) And this must be to such an extent that *I* disappear and He take my place. That is the part that making my daily Communion plays. It may be a long process but that is what it is calculated to do — "that we may dwell in Him and He in us". Our Lord was like Blessed Mary, for was He not of her substance? And she was like Him, for are we not made in the image and likeness of God? Our Lord has taken our human nature. And the Blessed Virgin Mary is there, as the representative of that human nature. Although she is able to

keep herself in the background, she is the instrument upon which God depends for doing that fine and noble work of molding the human character of His Incarnate Son. "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man" (Luke 2:52)—and so did the Mother. Sometimes instruments become dull and even useless, but not so here, for her life had, at least humanly speaking, to be coextensive with His Life, and she had to continue to grow in usefulness and service, in love and sacrifice. That was a part of the promise she made in accepting the position of queen.

Let us reflect that there were the same human problems and difficulties to overcome that we find in our lives—the little exigencies of daily life, the contacts with people of varying temperaments, yet, unlike us, Blessed Mary met all these experiences without sin. In fact, it was more difficult for her than for us, for she had the double responsibility of growing in holiness herself to final perfection, and also of seeing that her Child had that noble example displayed by her, and then the constant care of seeing that the perfect Man was supplied with all the needs for His Life here.

And it was just as hard for her to supply His needs as it is for us to supply the needs of our souls in order that He may find an abiding place within us. See how she supplied the wherewithal for His first miracle: "Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it."

(John 2:5) Blessed Mary was so used to doing that herself that she could advise others. She had found out what a blessed thing it was to do whatever He said: that was why she advised others to try and thus to derive blessings. When we do God's Will as perfectly as did Our Lady, then God in a measure works at our suggestion. How often has it happened that when we have come to Our Lord and have placed others before Him to do what He knows is best, sometimes, and often, He has done for the person just what we had in our own hearts as being good for them. That brings us to the point of the perfect cooperation of the Blessed Virgin with Our Lord.

Humanly speaking, it was a most difficult task for her to do His Will constantly, since He was her Son, and since she had the full responsibility of teaching Him and of providing for Him. Whenever we think that we have a hard and difficult time in cooperating fully and entirely with God's Will, let us see then what an infinitely greater work it was for Our Lady.

Our Lord tells us that He did always those things that pleased His Father. The voice at the Baptism came and said "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased". (Matthew 3:17) Who then was responsible for all this, humanly speaking, but His holy Mother? For Our Lord has evidently just left home and is just beginning His public ministry. These were the simple ways of

obedience and filial subjection which were His because of the teaching and the example of His Mother.

We are so apt to look over and to overlook these things because they seem so matter-of-fact. But this filial subjection meant the doing of the Father's Will in the minutest detail, even as in the greatest act of obedience and sacrifice. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy Word". (Luke 1 :38)—When Mary dedicated herself to God, she did so to the fullest extent and forever. She was not the Mother of Our Lord one day and then on the next wishing she were someone else, or regretting that she had promised to cooperate with God in that way forever. It was a whole-hearted co-operation. God could feel that where His Son was, there was the Mother. There was almost no limit to the extent to which this cooperation must go. At times it seems almost cruel to deal so with one as pure and as loving as the Blessed Virgin Mary, and yet that was the price to be paid for accepting God's call to her. None of God's friends regard the strict carrying out of His Will as hard or cruel. Like her Son, Blessed Mary was as the corn of wheat which was cast into the ground and which died,—preferring to die in God's service and to rise again bearing more fruit than to live to and for herself.

So far as we know Our Lady never knew any will but Our Lord's Will—God's Will. When she had the chance to make up her

own mind she preferred to let God decide for her. It was not a case of being a victim of circumstances in which she had no say nor right to assert herself. Rather, she relinquished the right to think and to act for herself—"Be it unto me according to Thy Word". (Luke 1:38) And so God in causing her to be the Mother of His Son restored to her the power of choosing, but of choosing only His Will.

So when we have the Blessed Virgin Mary as our close friend, learning to know her as we meditate upon her sublime yet simple life, we see how God has exalted His lowly handmaiden. We begin to realize that the humility which she displays we, too, can display, especially when God's Will is put to us in the simple and ordinary ways of life. We do not always understand what obeying His Will may involve, but we know that whatever that may be, ultimately it will be to God's glory. And because of that cooperation, that working with God in our daily prayers,—that togetherness with Him which deepens as we go on in the ways of prayer and as we become more full of grace by and through our Holy Communions,—we know that we have a share in that glory that is hers. We know that in some measure that glory will also be for us. And we learn that our lives must just be simple and natural so that by doing God's Will we may grow more and more supernatural and may show His Life in our lives.

II

BEHOLD THY MOTHER

“Behold we have forsaken all and followed Thee; what shall we have therefore?”

—Matthew 19:27

THERE is an opinion among some Christians that all the fine and noble virtues which the Church has attributed to the Blessed Virgin are for the most part exaggerated and imaginary. It may be pointed out to us by such people that Our Lord after He left home in order to follow His vocation never again returned there—“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head”. (Luke 9:58) Also, that Our Lord did not go about talking of His Mother and telling everyone what a fine Mother He had. No mention is made of her in the Gospels except when she is with Him and He never points her out as a model for others to follow, although He does say “Learn of Me” (Matthew 11:29). Moreover they tell us that when Mary and some of His disciples sought for Him when He was in a house, evidently teaching, and the people said to Him, “Behold, thy Mother and thy brethren without seek for Thee”, (Mark 3:32) He seems to wave them aside, saying, “Who is my Mother, or my brethren?” (Mark 3:33)

We could go on and find all sorts of similar incidents and we could begin to feel very sorry for His Mother for being so forgotten

and so neglected and so put aside after all that she had done to make His ministry possible. But we need not feel sorry for her because she did not feel sorry for herself. There was no reason for self pity, no room in her heart and in her life for such unworthy feelings and thoughts.

When Mary accepted God's call for her she had no preconceived ideas about the matter. She knew that it all was a deep mystery, both His life and her life, and to question anything that she did not understand would be an unfaithful thing to do. Moreover, it would have been disloyal to God whom she had promised to serve and to Jesus whom she had promised to bear and to nourish, not for her own pleasure and satisfaction and comfort, but for God's work and for the salvation of mankind. When the mysterious veil was partly thrown aside to give her a slight glimpse as to what she should expect in regard to her vocation, we see the reverence and the dignity of the Lord's Mother—"But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart". (Luke 2:19)

Let us remember that Our Lord did not go out and begin His ministry in order to call His Mother to repentance. No, He came to call sinners. That is why he left her for a while to do the work that the Father had appointed for Him.

When we leave our homes to pursue what we are sure is God's work for us, when we

leave our loved ones there, do we expect them to feel sorry for themselves and for us? What an undignified thing it would be and how out of keeping with the tone and spirit of Our Lord's Life and that of His holy Mother if He had gone about with His Mother everywhere, showing her to everybody and patting her on the back, telling everyone what a wonderful Mother she was! When we look for such things, when we are slightly disappointed that the lives of Our Lord and His Mother do not show such things, then we with others have failed to grasp the meaning of the Gospel—what it meant for Our Lord and what it meant for Our Lady.

When Our Lord performed His first miracle at Cana of Galilee we are told that "The Mother of Jesus was there" (John 2:1). Later on, in St. John's Gospel we find that on the night of His betrayal, Our Lord said "Father I will that they also whom thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am." (John 17:24) That was the proof; that was what really mattered. We find that where we see Our Lord in need, and there seems to be no one else who really understands, His Mother is there with Him. That "*thereness*" of Our Lady in respect to Our Lord seems to be the outstanding manifestation of her real glory. Was she here one day, there the next, according to season, disposition, feeling, temper, mood? Not Mary. She was *there* always; *there* everywhere, especially where He is.

Our Lady is always overshadowed, first by the Holy Ghost to protect her from curiosity and to give her the chance of serving God as an handmaid even though she is queen. Then she is overshadowed by her Son in order to deepen her humility. Only God Himself cannot be humble for there is no one before whom He could humble Himself. But His Son, Our Lord, is humble, lowly and meek and so in order that they together may manifest that greatest of virtues,—“He hath exalted the humble and meek” (Luke 1:52)—He humbles them first to the ignominy of the Cross, then raises them on high to heaven.

But to what purpose was all this humility, this service, this unselfishness, this sacrifice, this self-abandonment and self-obliteration? Where on earth is it going to end? Where is it leading her? As we have just inferred, it led her to where Our Lord is. All true vocations do that, regardless of what form the call may take. It must however be a true vocation—a real “calling”—not just a choosing of something that one likes particularly.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” people ask children, and the children reply with various aspirations, “Oh I want to be a dressmaker”; I want to be a policeman”; “I should like to be a teacher”; “I am going to be a fireman”; “I think I will be a stenographer”—or some other nice occupation that will be pleasant and interesting. Of course that is childish wishful thinking. The vocation that we follow must be

according to God's will for us. A vocation is not always what seems to be suited to our temperament. I do not necessarily mean a vocation to the religious life. I mean the vocation to be a person like Our Lady and at the same time to do the work that is ours to accomplish.

Often as we go along in life, we repeat to Our Lord the words that St. Peter said to Him, "Behold we have forsaken all and followed Thee; what shall we have therefore?" (Matthew 19:27) We want to be sure, before we venture, that there are oars in our little boat. We want all the way to be made clear to us. Mind you, that is only in regard to the work we do for God. A person will go in debt for an education and will take a chance on spending years repaying what he has borrowed and will do that with pleasure. He is willing and ready to go on a venture that is not certain to give any immediate return. But when Our Lord is concerned, there is that question of a bargain.

In the Blessed Virgin, however, we see no such bargaining. The question with her was not "What shall I receive?" as much as it was "What shall I give unto the Lord?" We know that she received all the opportunities that Jesus received for doing what God wanted them to do. As soon as Mary cast in her lot with God's plans, she had to look forward to bearing the consequences of being Our Lord's Mother. She had all the opportunities of becoming the greatest of God's

Saints, and in her simple way she availed herself of these in such a manner that no one has ever been able to take that distinction from her. What opportunities did she have? Well, she had the horrible experience of facing the possibility of seeing her young Babe murdered by the wicked Herod. She had the exile into Egypt that was so cruelly forced upon her with the Child and St. Joseph. She had the responsibility of nourishing Our Lord and of bringing Him to manhood that He might be prepared for the sacrifice that He was to offer of Himself on the Cross.

It is true that Mary did have a share in the joys of Our Lord. But they were not the kind of joys that we are apt to delight in or to desire. There was the joy of knowing that whatever He had to do, He could find in her absolute cooperation and readiness to go all the way with Him—"Whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain". (Matthew 5:41) We know to a small extent what the way was and where it led—"Yea a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also". (Luke 2:35) The sword was entering deeper and deeper into her soul. That sword was to cause the death of her Son but it would not be quite as merciful to her. Following Our Lord meant that she would follow Him to His death and to the grave. She did all this because she was the handmaid of the Lord. She was the one upon whom God could depend for doing

those little things for His Son in such an extraordinary way that God's purposes in this world might be fulfilled and thus through Our Lord's sacrifice bring the world back again to God.

Like all of God's true friends, she did not think that what she was doing was anything but her duty. Nor did she feel that her duty to God brought her into hard, embarrassing and inconvenient positions and predicaments. If we really love people, we do not allow ourselves to think that doing them favors, kindnesses, little services, or even sharing in their sorrows and sacrifices is anything but a privilege. That is the way Our Lord's Blessed Mother regarded her share in His redemptive work and that all of Our Lord's friends have regarded and still do regard their part in His work here in the world. It is only a matter of reminding ourselves that it is for Our Lord that we do the little things that help His Life to be lived both in our own selves and in those with whom we come in contact. To what extent the Blessed Virgin was able to do that, her friends and her neighbors could not perceive, probably because her manner of doing fine things was so natural, quiet and unassuming. They did not know nor realize that so many of the great things that Our Lord did during His earthly life were, as it were, prompted by Our Lady. Of course we, too, can prompt Our Lord to do for others by our sincere and loving prayers and by our lives of unselfish service to others.

And then we see Our Lady as she leaves Calvary. We cannot begin to fathom the grief and sorrow of her loyal loving heart, or the loneliness. She no longer has even a home of her own. St. John takes her to his home. Alone? It would seem so. Forgotten? How many would have given up in bitterness and despair. For them all would be lost. Life would no longer have any meaning. And after the Ascension, with Jesus her Son gone from this world forever, is she broken-hearted, disappointed, sad, sorry for herself that He has left her in this way? No, Mary is a Christian and no Christian who is true to Our Lord can rightly act or think in any other way than did Our Lord's Mother.

This is what happened: in the first chapter of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, the 14th verse, we read, "These all"—that is, the Apostles—"continued with one accord in prayer and supplication with the women and Mary the Mother of Jesus and with His brethren". And that is the last mention there is of her in the New Testament, except in the vision St. John had of her many years later.

What Mary did, and what so very few of us realize that she did, was to take her place among the little group of Our Lord's friends that made up the Church. What Blessed Mary did was to become a communicant of the Church. She had done all of the other things about which we have spoken, and now she gives us the example as to how we are to go on with our Christian lives day by day.

From the Gospel account we see that she continued to say her prayers; that she continued to meditate and to contemplate; that she continued to mingle with the other Christian disciples, forgetting that there were among them those who had forsaken her Son when He was in great need. And she continued with the other Christian brothers and sisters in the breaking of the bread daily. As we should say in modern days, she attended Mass daily and she made her Holy Communion.

It is not easy for us to realize just what she felt and experienced in those Holy Communions. She was the Mother of Our Lord and had given Him to us and now He gives Himself back to her. As we come to Mass and as we make our Holy Communions often and regularly, we can know that what we do is what Our Lady did for the last years of her life. The Life and the Blessing that she took into herself, we take, and in the same manner—by our Lord's loving and generous giving of Himself. The Communions Mary made, however, were holy and without stain. Before her Holy Communion she did not have to make her confession as we do. She was sinless and we are still trying to be less and less sinful as we go on in our Christian lives. That loving and holy contact with Our Lord in Holy Communion and that grateful affection which we have towards Our Lord's Mother will, as we go on, make us realize more and more how much Mary means to us and to all true Christians.

“And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars”. (Revelation 12:1) Indeed wonderful! But not so wonderful as the woman clothed with love and humility bending over the Child in the manger of Bethlehem and standing beneath the Son on Calvary, and as the woman we see carefully taking her humble place among Christians to encourage them and to give them an example of how to serve God. Let us ask her to show us Jesus and the way to Heaven.